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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000193

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SUBJECT: KNU WILLING TO TALK?; ETHNIC ALLIANCES IN TROUBLE

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CLASSIFIED BY: Alex Barrasso, Chief, Pol/Econ, CG Chiang Mai.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

Summary and Comment

¶1. (C) The Karen National Union (KNU) is interested in a just peace with the Burmese regime if a mutually acceptable agreement can be reached, and a major regime offensive in Karen State may not take place this dry season, according to KNU contacts. Other Burmese exile interlocutors told us separately that efforts to form an ethnic military alliance are hitting snags, as are attempts to preserve an existing political alliance among politically-active exile groups.

¶2. (C) Comment: It is not surprising that exiled ethnic political groups cannot seem to unite at this critical juncture in Burmese history with the 2010 elections looming large on the horizon. The KNU's apparent willingness to talk peace is somewhat of a surprise, given that its new leadership has previously expressed hard-line sentiments. However, the "just" peace the KNU is seeking is likely not attainable under the current military regime. End Summary and Comment.

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KNU Willing, but is the Regime?
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¶3. (C) Isaac Po, who has been an excellent source of information about the KNU and its prolonged struggle against the Burmese regime for several years, told us on December 4 that if the group thinks it can achieve a "just and fair" peace with the Burmese regime, the KNU will seek it out. P/E Chief pressed him on this point, noting that the KNU's new leadership elected during its quadrennial Congress this past October has a reputation for being hard-line. Po agreed, but noted that the KNU is willing to moderate its position if the circumstances are right. If a mutually acceptable agreement cannot be reached, the leadership is prepared to consider "all other options," Po said without elaborating. (Note: We attempted to meet recently-elected KNU senior leaders during Charge Dinger's visit to the Thai-Burma border in October, but were told they were not available. Two subsequent requests have also gone unanswered.)

¶4. (C) Po also told us that the KNU has not observed large-scale Burma Army or Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA -- a pro-regime KNU splinter group) troop movements in and around Karen State in preparation for a likely large offensive,

as is typically the case at the start of the dry season. He speculated that significant military clashes in Karen territory might not take place this year, with the regime focused instead on the upcoming 2010 elections. He relayed separately that Ner Da, the son of late KNU leader General Bo Mya, has been marginalized within the organization, given his failure to win a seat on the group's Executive or Standing Committee. Ner Da is also likely to lose his Military Attache title, Po asserted, though he could not say precisely when this would happen.

Ethnic Political Alliance in Trouble

¶5. (C) Meanwhile, three exile political contacts informed us on separate occasions that the Seven Alliance of ethnic political groups that held through the May 2008 constitutional referendum was having difficulty remaining united. The head of the Ethnic Nationalities Council and a representative of the National League for Democracy Liberated Areas (ENC and NLDLA, respectively) lamented the divisiveness. He cited two key issues causing this: the misuse of USG funds (provided through the National Endowment for Democracy and other grantees) by the groups for the "Vote No" campaign ahead of the referendum; and an effort by the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB -- the largest umbrella organization of exile political groups) to challenge the regime's right to represent the people of Burma at the United Nations.

¶6. (C) According to our contacts, the UN credentials challenge, which has been reported in the Burmese exile media, has been particularly divisive. The NCUB has pursued it full tilt, despite the refusal of the self-proclaimed government in exile (NCGUB -- National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma) to lend its support. A Women's League of Burma (WLB) member told us the disagreements are so stark that the exile movement

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sent two delegations to the UN during the UNGA -- one supporting the credentials challenge, and another that did not.

¶7. (C) The same contact also relayed that the NCUB is insisting that the Seven Alliance move forward in a unified manner with the NCUB as its leader -- something that the other six groups are not prepared to do. Contacts at the Forum for Democracy in Burma, another component of the Seven Alliance, told us that five of the groups had already agreed to work together on planning for the 2010 elections, and that the WLB would likely join, but that it was quite possible they would move ahead without the NCUB. Both WLB and ENC contacts expressed frustration at this scenario, noting respectively that it was "not good for the movement," and that the ENC had to maintain a strong voice in the process since it is the only group representing the interests of ethnic minorities.

¶8. (C) Comment: The leader of the NCUB, Maung Maung, who is the son of National League for Democracy Central Executive Committee Member U Nyunt Wei, has a reputation for flexing his political muscle, often forcing member groups to follow him or be marginalized within the organization. . End Comment.

What About Military Cohesion?

¶9. (C) Separately, leaders of several ethnic groups with armed wings, including the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), the National Unity Party of Arakan (NUPA), and the Kachin National Organization (KNO), presented to us a proposal for a military alliance that they say also includes the KNU, elements of the Shan State Army, and some Chin groups. They told us the aim of the alliance would be to overthrow the current military regime by 2010. It is a very detailed plan with tables, charts, requests for weapons, budgets, etc. However, the KNU's Isaac Po, when we met him on December 4, told us the KNU was not fully committed to this alliance, and did not want to seek U.S.

support through this proposal. Nor have the Shan requested USG support for the proposed alliance, to our knowledge. This leaves doubts as to the real cohesion of the grouping. (Comment: Even if all the ethnic armed groups pooled their forces, they would still be severely out-manned and out-gunned by the Burmese military, and would likely be able to do little more than be a temporary nuisance to the regime. That said, if there is interest in reviewing the documents, we can forward them to EAP or Embassy Rangoon for consideration. End Comment).

¶10. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassies Rangoon and Bangkok.
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